



Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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A fair few of Robin Williams' zaniest movies entail Robin Williams being Robin Williams. No acting required. Toys is one such example where the director - Barry Levinson of 'Good Morning, Vietnam' and 'Rainman' fame - seems to have instructed him to be as kooky as humanly possible while the cameras capture every madcap ad-lib.

(Whistling the 's')

Leslie Zevo: You look ssssstunning.

Gwen Tyler: Oh, ssssstop.



Typically this impromptu jolly japery pays off, resulting in the box office tills ringing out a cash chorus alluvion until the action figures come home. Not so with 'Toys', which broke with tradition by only clawing back half its \$50m budget and being nominated for a Razzie award for worst director. Ironical since this is the one Barry really put his heart and soul into and had waited well over a decade to produce.



David Ansen writing for Newsweek in December 1992 explained...

"The failure of Barry Levinson's *Toys* is of a different order: it's the kind of folly only a very fine filmmaker could make, a labor of misguided love.

In an era in which the line between video games and televised warfare has become thin, there's the germ of an interesting satirical idea here. But the notion is given no visceral impact. There's not a recognizable human being to care about, the storyline is thin to the point of anorexia and much of the off-the-cuff comedy falls flat in the absurdist setting."

Vanessa Letts writing for The Spectator in March 1993 hammered another nail into the coffin...

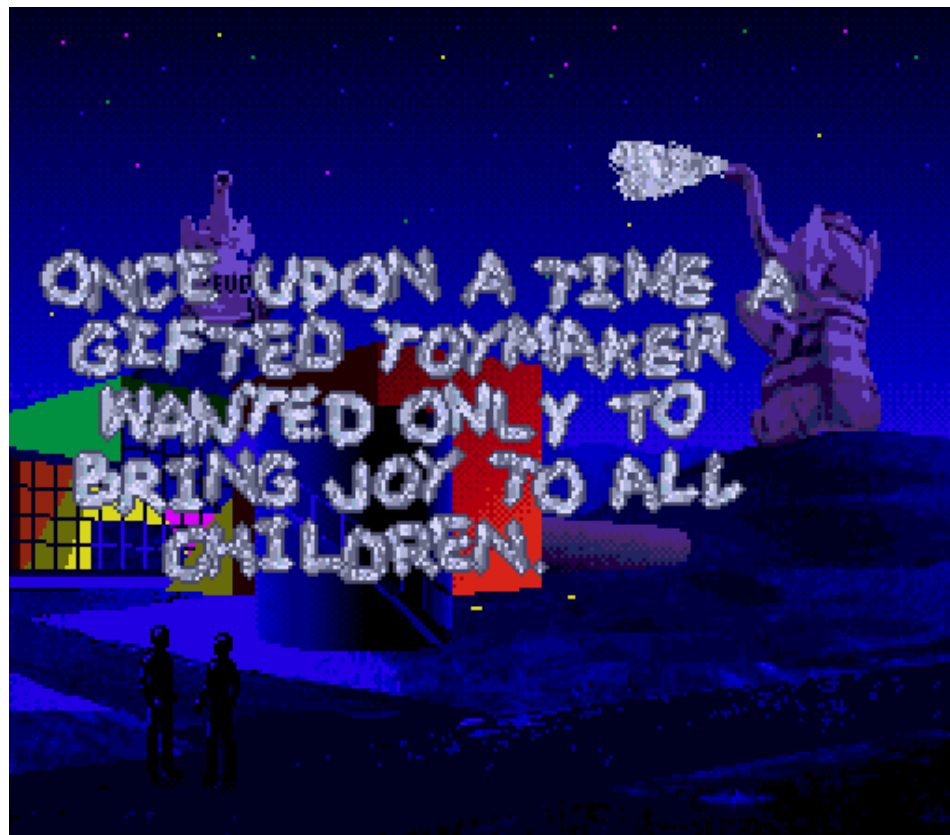
"Amidst a great list of stupidities, the most annoying is the fact that a film which is all anti-war and pro-innocence, ends with 20 minutes of exaggerated, noisy and completely unnecessary violence. The message of Toys is supposed to be not merely that violence is a bad idea, but specifically that recreational, pretend violence is a bad idea; and yet its entertainments peak with a long drawn out battle, resulting in one and a half deaths. No child I know would benefit from seeing this work, and certainly no adult."



Movie critiquing stalwart, Roger Ebert, didn't loath Toys. Befuddlement best describes his summation. In December 1992 he opined...

"There's a curious residue of dissatisfaction after 'Toys' is over. It opened so well and promised so much that we're confused: Is that all there is? The film seems filled with ideas, but what are they, exactly? The production creates a wonderful world, but doesn't make its purpose clear. It is impossible to fault the performances (Williams seems born to live in this toyland, and Cusack's performance seems more subtly inspired the more you think about it). The production design deserves Academy recognition. But at the most fundamental level, 'Toys' is a film not quite sure what it's about."

Robin stars as Leslie, son of Kenneth, an acclaimed toymaker and proprietor of Zevo Toys, not all that dissimilar to Willa Wonka of Chocolate Factory fame. Upon realising that his days are numbered due to poor heart health, Kenneth makes arrangements for his successor to take charge of the factory.



Leslie would be the natural first choice as he lives and breathes toys and has been his dad's apprentice for as long as he can remember. Trouble is he's deemed too flaky and irresponsible to take care of the business side of the operation, so management duties are instead conferred upon his uncle, Leland, a soulless former three-star army general with no concept of the magic of childhood or impact of play. He wasn't a *specific* soldier, just a *general* one. Sorry, this is the level of some of the humour you can expect so I feel the need to prepare you.



Kenneth isn't delighted over the prospect of a violent warmonger running the show, yet reluctantly concedes that this is his only option in the short-term. In the interests of maintaining the status quo, in the hope that Leland steering the ship in the wrong direction will motivate Leslie to haul it back in line with his father's benevolent ethos, Kenneth signs on the dotted line.

Leslie Zevo: There's a madman at the factory, and it's no longer me.

Nice, friendly, non-violent toys have been a cornerstone of the operation from day one so unsurprisingly an antagonistic culture clash ensues. Leland soon commandeers the majority of the factory to begin manufacturing war-themed toys, before hitting upon what he optimistically assumes will be his chef-d'oeuvre; engineering remotely computer-controlled toys with the capacity to replace full-sized combat vehicles in military operations at a fraction of the cost. This he believes will redeem his sullied reputation in the forces and save his delicate ego in the process. It's claimed that Levinson, therefore, predicted or even conceived the RQ-1 Predator military drones that came into force three years later. Hmm...



General Leland Zevo: Put this place on red alert. They're as good as dead.

Hagenstern: That's your son, sir.

General Leland Zevo: War knows no relatives.



Even his formerly loyal son, covert ops stealth ninja, Patrick (LL Cool J), is so aghast by his father's megalomania that he switches sides, joining forces with Leslie, his scatterbrained robot sister, Alsatia (Joan Cusack) and girlfriend Gwen (Robin Wright).



True plot twist alert, unbeknownst to Leslie, Alsatia is a cyborg constructed to keep him company. Leslie, in contrast, was "born in the back of a bumper car".

Leslie Zevo: I'd hug you but your body is over there.

Alsatia Zevo: I really miss my heart.

Leslie Zevo: We'll get you two back together soon.



Also, yes, *that* LL Cool J, there's only one. The subject of him being black and his dad white is never broached. I'm not going to use the phrase "person of colour", that's demented. Neither is it addressed that Michael Gambon is English and Mr Cool J American. No mention of adoption, and it doesn't occur to anyone to ask.

Alsatia Zevo: You know, you remind me a lot of my brother.

Patrick Zevo: That's impossible. We're exact opposites.

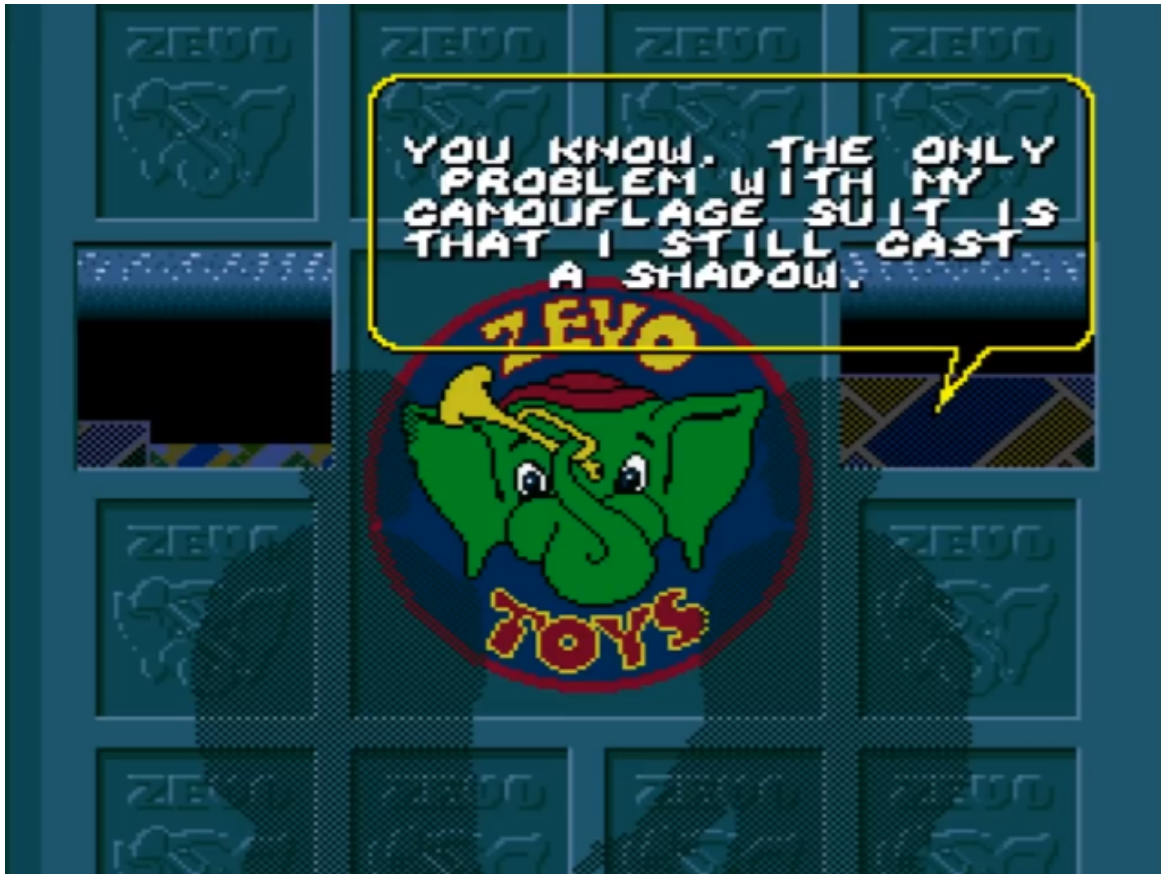
Alsatia Zevo: That's what I mean. He's all silly and soft on the outside and on the inside he's really strong and you're just the opposite.

Together Leslie and Patrick stare down the barrel of a not always metaphorical gun to tackle the might of the evil military-industrial complex. Good toys vs equally creepy bad toys square up in the showdown of a lifetime. At *dawn* probably, although it's hard to tell when the skirmish takes place inside a factory that's been locked down tighter than a clamshell for confidentiality reasons. Could even have happened at the OK Corral. Ah, no, it's Moscow, Idaho. Not the Russian one, there's another one in the US too. Anyway, it doesn't matter. "Let joy and innocence prevail!"

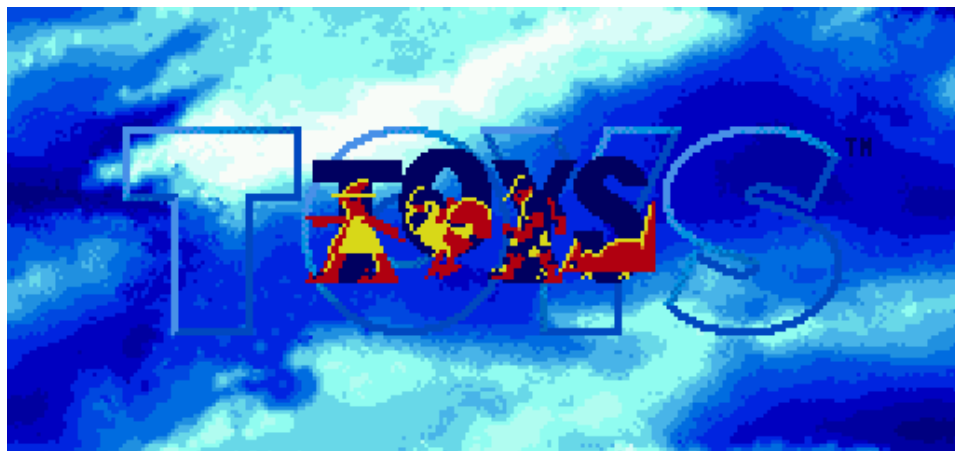
A year later, in 1993, Absolute Entertainment released an accompanying video game for the SEGA Mega Drive and SNES. Tag-lined 'Let the Toy Wars begin!' it neglects to even mention most of the ancillary characters and even excludes Robin Williams from the box, manual and so on, I expect due to the additional cost of licensing his likeness.



I wouldn't put money on it!



Patrick contributes by "working behind the scenes to help out", though no allusion is made to LL. It's explained that he's "going into deep cover" to "supply Leslie with as many Good Toys as he needs to overcome the Bad ones", which saved the animators and graphic designers an arduous task as well as being germane to the plot. Very crafty!



As the manual helpfully informs us "to start, push the start button on the controller".



A large team of developers contributed to Toys, amongst them eminent games designer and Activision co-founder, David Crane. That's right, the same industry virtuoso who brought us the first Ghostbusters game, Little Computer People, A Boy and his Blob, amongst a litany of other venerated titles.

You'll find a fascinating transcribed interview Chris Bieniek conducted with David in 1994 over on the Video Game Ephemera web site. He covers much of his career up to that point including his thoughts on the development of Toys and why it performed as poorly as the movie on which it's based.

Toys is mostly an isometric action game, though for the last stage, still playing as Leslie, we switch into side-scrolling shoot 'em up mode to pilot the miniature model plane seen during the movie's opening Christmas play. It also plays a significant role in the climax of the finale battle, allowing Leslie to save the day, the factory, his father's legacy and so on.





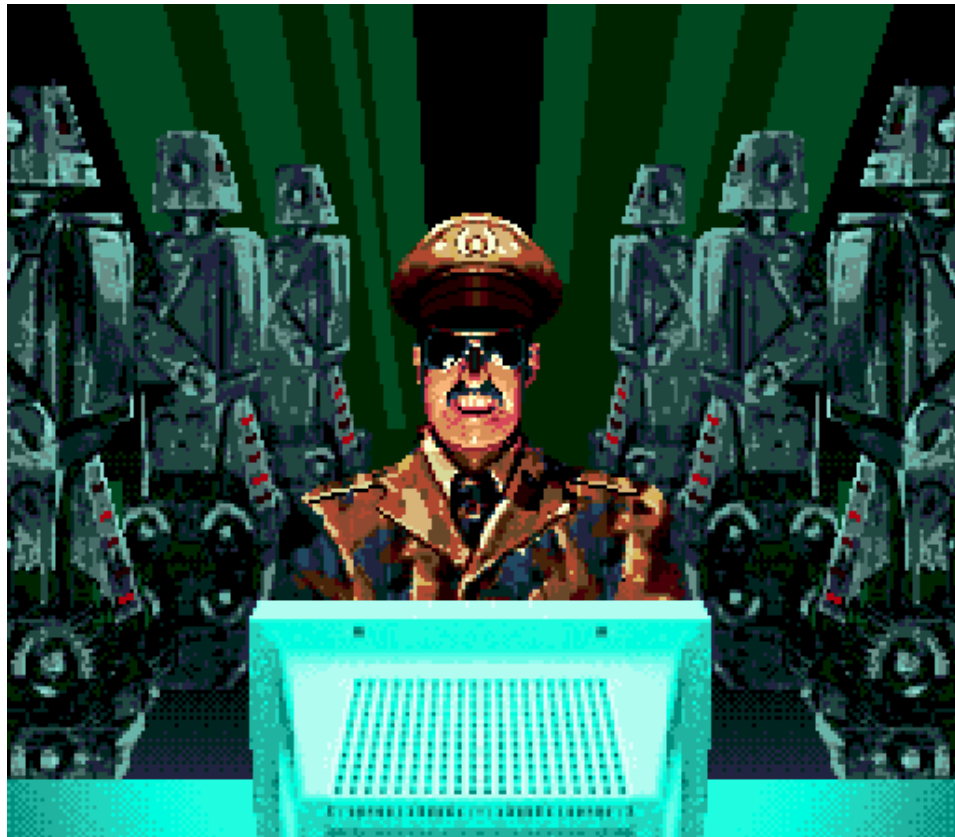
This grapple for control is the one sequence Absolute's game aims to reflect. Naturally then, it revolves around combat. It turns out in the movie as well as its pixelated compadre that the best way to tackle the threat of violence is to meet it head-on with more violent violence. What message we're expected to absorb from this is a mystery. War is bad, but only if the baddies start it? Not that I have an alternative approach. Although Banksy's 'throw flowers, not grenades' mural carries feel-good sentiments, it sadly doesn't offer any further clues as to how to deal with nations that harbour no intention of being friends.



Leslie Zevo: You tried to kill us all...

General Leland Zevo: Heh... c'mon, Leslie... can't you take a joke?

Leslie Zevo: Oh yeah! I love jokes! I love all kinds of jokes. But you know what I don't like? I don't like people trying to kill me, hurting my family and my friends, and destroying the whole world as I know it. That just doesn't sit well with me.



Never mind, the medium of gaming wasn't going to address the dilemma either. To defeat General Leland and terminate his fascist regime we must first disable his elephant-head security system.



This initially entails dispatching the toy artillery defending it by unleashing one of our own supplied by Patrick. Given that the good guys consist of a squad of safe, cuddly, friendly toys with no military experience, our chances aren't looking too promising. Fail and both lines of 'active' defence re-spawn.

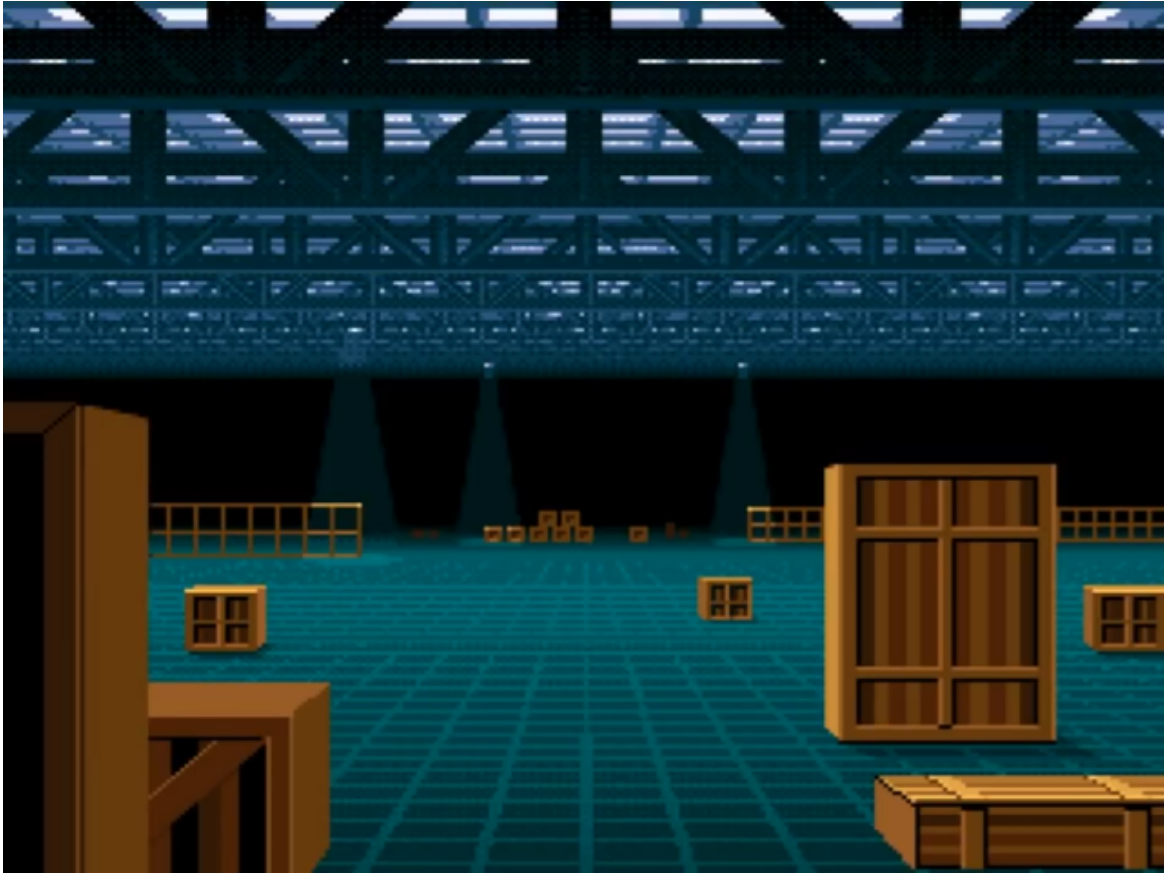
Throughout our mission, we aim to clear all malevolent invaders from the subjugated toy factory...



...cafeteria (where Leslie falls head over heels in love with colleague, Gwen) and the warehouse.







Amongst the adversaries encountered are grenade balloons, time bomb balloons, pogo bears, exploding elves, walking bombs, jets, paratroopers, soldiers, spiders, helicopters, slime, jeeps, tanks, bulldozers, and robot crates.







Leslie Zevo: Bastards, they attacked us while we were at prayer. It's like Pearl Harbor.

Gamers should think themselves lucky, it could have been much worse...

Hagenstern: Should I deactivate the sea swine, sir?

Leslie Zevo: A sea swine? Oh, yes, you deactivate the god-damn sea swine!

Some enemies attack in homing mode, tracking good toys or Leslie until they or we are killed. Others patrol in rhythmic patterns and so are easier to avoid. Our challenge is to establish how best to counter each individual enemy, introducing an element of strategy to the proceedings.

Leslie Zevo: Hold 'till you see the lights in their eyes.

We'll certainly need a devious game plan what with possessing little means of taking evasive action. An option to roll or leap out

of harm's way would have worked wonders. As it is we must depend on collecting energy-boosting Zevo logos (or batteries in the final level) and life-hearts to maintain our health. Lose all five 'ticks' of health and that's a life gone. A gap opens up in the ground and swallows us whole. Upon regeneration, Leslie finds himself located elsewhere on the level, adding to his sense of disorientation.



Our mainstay unlimited-ammo, arcing peanut gun is the default weapon deployed, though plenty more are available, falling into three categories.



Free-standing weapons activated with a shove include a Jack in the box, football, balloon clown and fire truck.

'Spotters' are found in gift-wrapped boxes and can be carried to a particular location before being released into the wild. These incorporate a toy chef, wind-up duck, elephant, football player, race car and traffic cop.

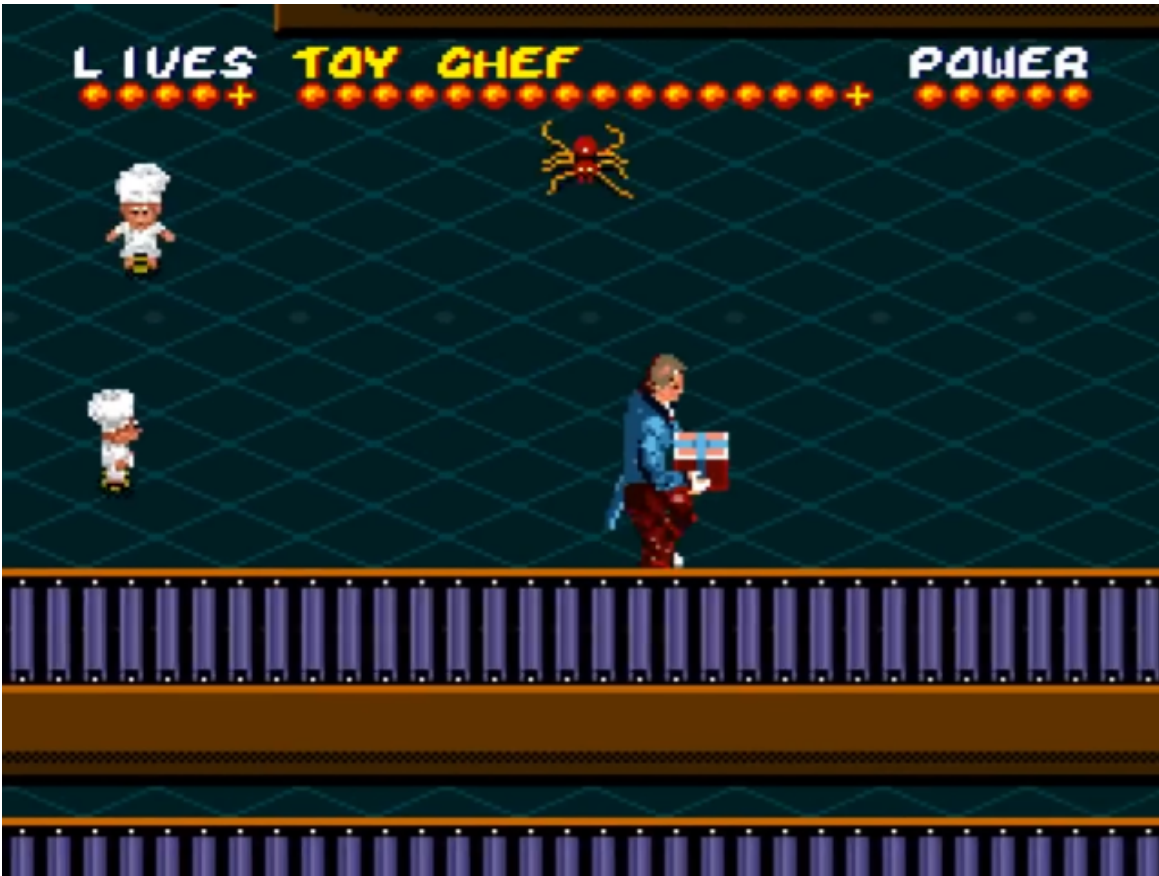


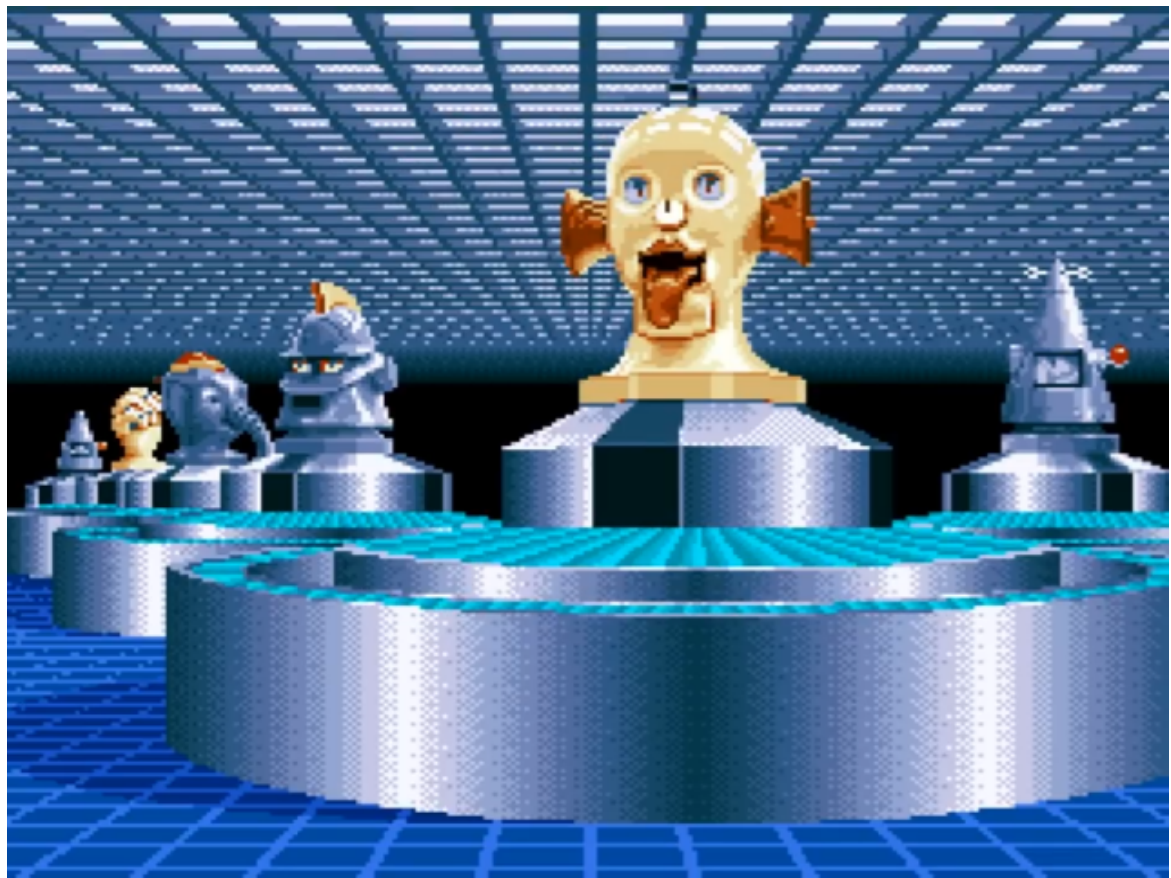
Finally, we have projectiles to wield; those that can be rolled, shot or chucked. On the menu are bowling balls, pie tins, flying disks, spinning tops, tomatoes, custard pies, and water balloons.



Weapons are delivered through a number of mechanisms, from production line carousels, the cafeteria food counter, warehouse's roller tracks, or simply scooped off the floor. Latterly, these can be designated more of whatever item we wish, assuming it's already in our inventory. Make sure the desired toy is selected before collecting a floor parcel and voila!









Plenty of choice, nevertheless, when such hand-held weapons are equally ineffective, they can be considered largely interchangeable. Toys and weapons are cycled using the joypad's shoulder buttons and activated with the A button. Take toys to a gunfight and the only defence left is love. Except I'm not sure how you weaponise that. I'd have to consult the Care Bears on that one.

If by some miracle we're able to clear two layers of defence blocking the path to Leland's subverted, rotating, laser packin' elephant head security cameras we must blind them with our water pistol of all things, before dismantling their iris lenses. Upon neutering the final elephant on each level, we move onto the next.



With his spy cameras out of action, we take to the skies on course for Leland's command centre, soaring above a replica Manhattan model village inspired by the play's set from the movie.





It doesn't run on pixie dust or candy canes so must be kept charged by swooping slowly through giant electrical coils whenever we get a spare moment between dodging enemy hurly-burly choppers.



Leland's barriers neutered, the washed-up former general is a sitting duck. Speaking of which, Alsatia sleeps in a giant one inside a David Blaine style glass display box. A doll's house fit for a doll. How quirky.

Leslie Zevo: In the words of Barbie, "I had a dream house."



While the long, impressively comprehensive manual makes Toys sound like a complex strategy game that demands the fine balancing of weapon choices, ultimately it amounts to a very primitive roam around a largely empty environment hoping something more interesting is around the next corner. In fact, the manual is so thorough, brimming with tips and tactical nuance, that I imagine very few people would bother reading it. It's almost as long as one of my stupid articles and no-one reads those. You're not even reading this one now. No, you're not!



Despite integrating two types of gameplay style, Toys feels one dimensional, repetitive and yet overcomplicated with if-then logic gate AI. You'd have to study the manual to appreciate the latter. Holistically a bit of an empty experience that unintentionally mirrors the disappointing movie.

Officially it's a dark satire enveloped in childhood paraphernalia and a bright pastel palette with aspirations of imparting something profound. What that might be isn't clear. It's certainly visually striking largely thanks to Ferdinando Scarfiotti's enchanting, hypnagogic set design, enriched by some genuinely amusing moments, just not half as insightful as it purports to be.

Comedy legend Robin Williams is wielded like a light entertainment tsar bomba, yet the most humorous highlights emerge through the efforts of his supporting cast, or simply the absurdity of the situations in which they find themselves.



Albeit smacking of Attack of the Killer Tomatoes, the Tetris-like shrinking room scene is brilliant. While the deadly solemn toy 'scientists' debate the optimal composition of fake vomit pats in a clinically bland white-out lab devoid of any equipment, the walls close in around them as though parodying a scene from Raiders of the Lost Ark. All the while its occupants oblivious to their predicament until they're jammed into a tiny area on top of the only uncrushable item in the room; a totally white, featureless table.

Asian Researcher: This vomit is very Anglo.

Leslie Zevo: This doesn't look like vomit.

Asian Researcher: Sorry sir, that's diarrhoea.

Leslie Zevo: Send that over to the Poop department.

Leland is steadily taking over the limited floor space to execute his nefarious scheme and everyone around him is too preoccupied to notice, that's the gag. It's a variation on the boiling frog analogy; do it slowly and subtly enough in the microcosm of a pan on a kitchen stove and before it can protest you've fed a Frenchman... or woman.

Researcher: Is this room getting smaller or am I bloating?

Asian Researcher: What!

Leslie Zevo: Oh look, we're being attacked by a crossword puzzle.

Well-constructed, scripted absurdity reminiscent of Catch-22, especially given the military motifs. It's these overwrought visual jokes that really pay off, the protracted build-up serving to trowel on the madness. We're running dangerously close to satire!



Spot the Quickshot Python joysticks

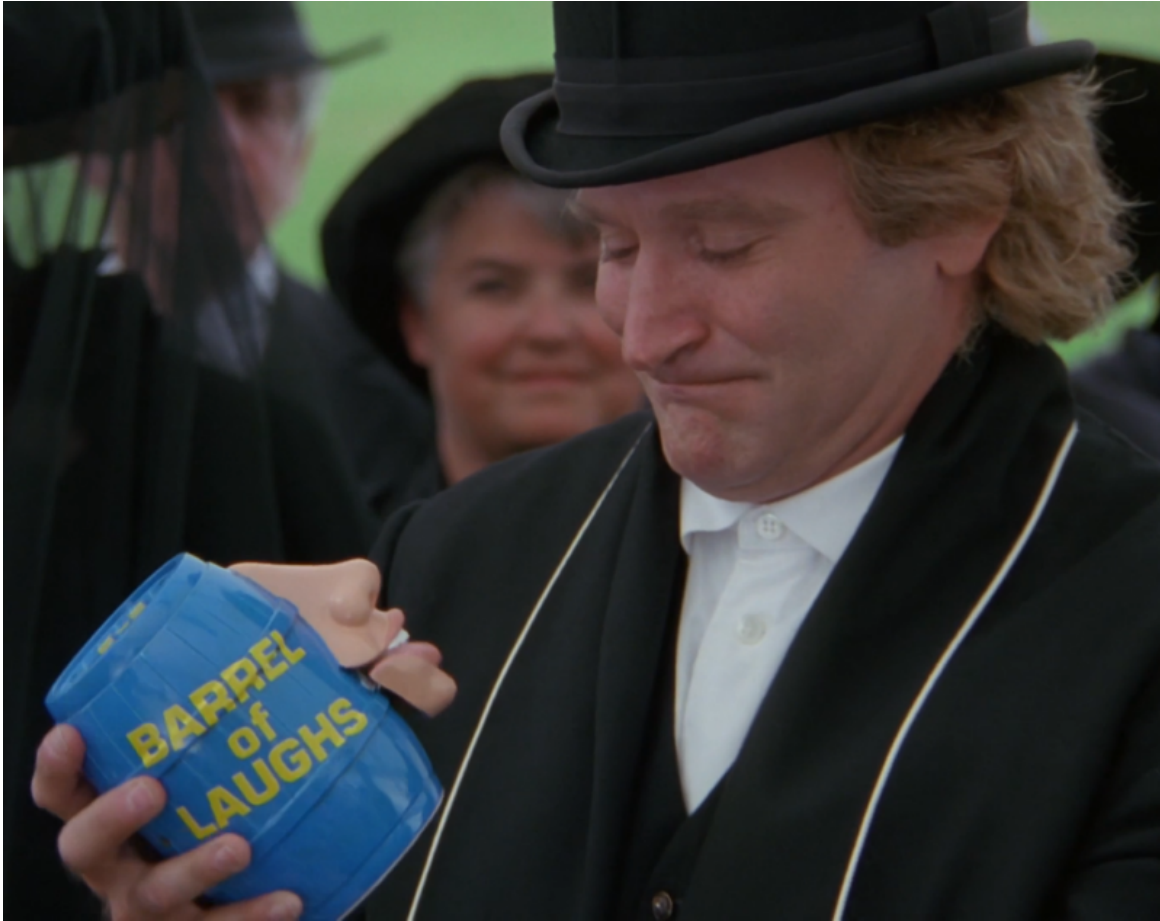
Perhaps the best example is the way Leland recruits kids to 'play' his computer 'games'. Little do they know they're remotely firing upon real civilian targets, exploited for their dexterously honed hand-eye coordination. His impetus for this cunning gambit was visiting an arcade alley and getting carried away blasting pesky UN transport. He probably watched War Games at some point too.



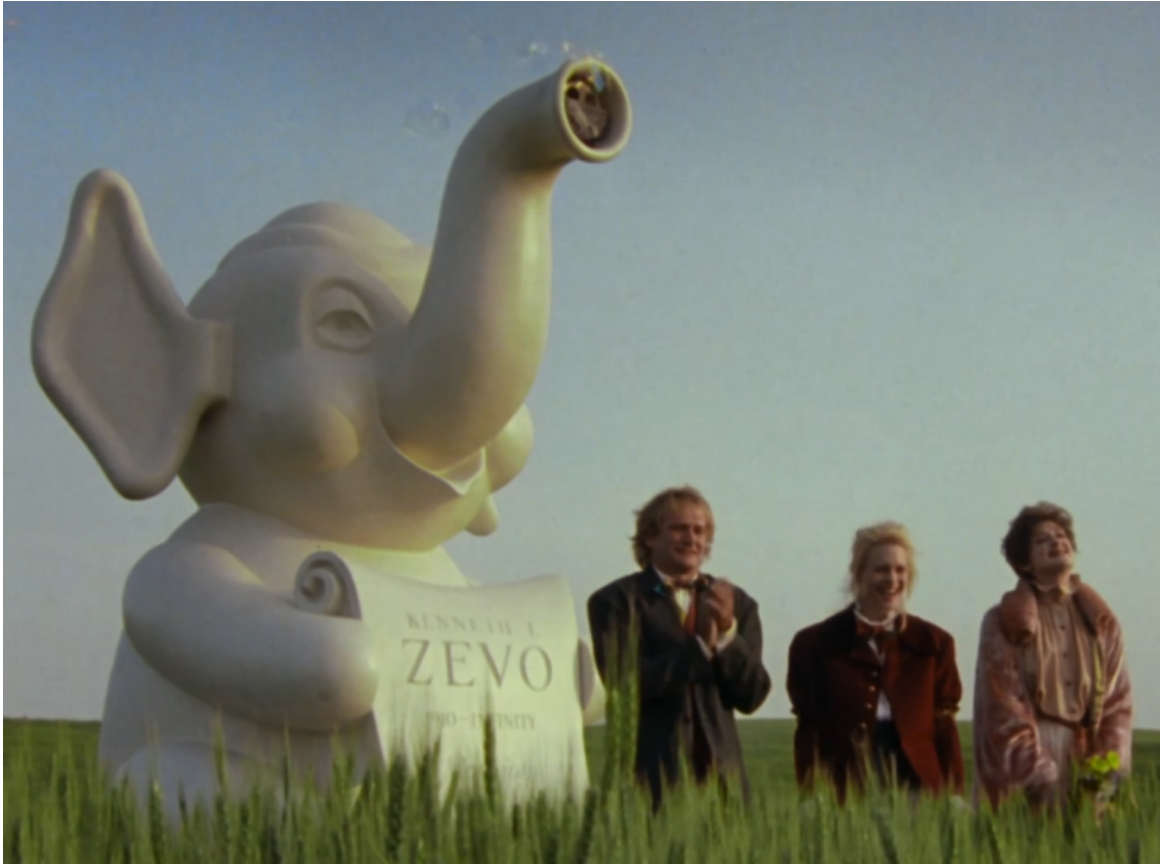
One of the sound effects heard during this sequence was lifted directly from Terminator 2: Judgment Day, while 'Tank Gunner' is actually a real-world game called Super Battletank, also developed by Absolute Entertainment.



When Kenneth has his terminal heart attack, an ambulance arrives serenading us with a playful ice-cream van style ditty. Beyond medical treatment, he's soon buried... with a 'barrel of laughs' sound-emitting toy. A canned laughter device. Whether or not to remove this toy from the coffin before lowering it into the ground is debated, before deciding to leave it alone on the assumption that the batteries will soon die anyway.



Long after, his family and friends visit Kenneth's elephant-shaped grave and wonder where the laughter is coming from, obviously a callback to the joke's earlier groundwork. It sounds pretty lame when you try to spell it out on paper. Seeing it play out on screen, deadpan delivery breathes life into the farce. Cajoled along by the fact that we're clued in on the earlier shared experience. Yeah, it's a cheap trick and I fell for it. I'm only human. Incidentally, the Zevo Tombstone has lived at Planet Hollywood in Niagara Falls, Ontario, since May 2001.



Another screwball scene I particularly enjoyed for its serious-nonsense quality is the one in which Leland instructs a worker to whisper a confidential conversation to keep it top secret. Leland can't hear what's being said so tells him to raise his volume. Repeating the line, his hushed tones increase a few decibels, yet Leland still can't decipher the words. After the second adjustment, the volume returns to the original level and the conversation continues uninterrupted.

Again, it doesn't sound hilarious when broken down to its basic components, comedy rarely does. You have to experience, not analysis it. Toys is that kind of movie; the usual formulaic structure doesn't apply. It's an art piece that should be absorbed like a deluge of colour, blinding light, preposterous physical effects and props. It doesn't make it a fantastic film, although adjusting our perspective *does* allow us to appreciate the positives without holding Toys up to traditional methods of scrutiny that can only crank out a sad-trumpeted thumbs down.



One interlude that captivates even some of Toys' detractors is the fake MTV 'Mirror Song' track Leslie and Gwen perform to distract two security guards (one of them Jamie Foxx), allowing them to breach a restricted area. It's the most ridiculously elaborate ruse you can imagine. One designed to achieve a goal that could easily have been resolved investing a micro-fraction of the effort expended. I won't spoil it any further, you need to look it up on YouTube yourself, even those of you intending to swerve the rest of the movie.

Other set-piece quips you could watch with the sound muted and still get the gist. Patrick climbs down from a toilet in a public WC, opens the cubical door, then opens the door of another cubical to retrieve the fake legs and trousers he left there to give the impression the cubical is occupied. Obviously completely pointless.

Later Leland tries to shoot a bluebottle with a pistol, an allusion to the Confucius quotation, "Never use a cannon to kill a fly". Even when it lands on his own foot he pulls the trigger with predictable consequences. Predictable to all except Leland who is shocked by the sudden pain. Are we sure this is aimed at 13+ year-olds?



Another moment that stands out involves Leslie shaping a face with his hand and feeding the makeshift 'mouth' with soup. He's the only one at the dinner table not wearing a bib... and the only

one covered in stray red wine. That had me grinning, making the next paragraph seem like a complete contradiction. I'm still in two minds so I won't edit it. Toys does that to you. It's possible to love it one minute and thrash against its immature stupidity the next. Watch it once and you might hate it. Give it a second chance and you could learn to relish lovingly orchestrated minutiae you missed the first time around.



Robin Williams was an outstanding actor who excelled when called upon to rein in the toddler on a Smarties overdose trip routine. Look what he achieved with One Hour Photo and Insomnia! Random ad-libbed nonsense is ideal to keep the kid's occupied while mummy and daddy take care of the boring adult stuff, but it's not needed in a social satire, if that's what this sought to be. You'd have thought Robin would have worked that out of his system by the time Mork and Mindy said its final nanoo-nanoo. It's absolute gibberish. What?!? It's hilarious! Shut

up you idiot. Did I tell you about the bit where he... (faded out by mysterious forces)



It's claimed that the critics at the time failed to comprehend the underlying sophistication of the art house presentation. What if instead, they recognised what it attempted to achieve and just weren't particularly impressed? Personally I love it. No, I don't. Yes, I do. Whichever voice in my head is right, Toys fascinates me, it's a beautifully disjointed mess. It's completely insane when you attempt to contemplate the lengths to which Toys' producers went engineering a segment of footage that could be on screen for merely five seconds. It's no great shock that 14 years passed between conception, convincing a major studio to fund it, and ultimately hatching the bizarre, visionary masterpiece menagerie.



"Make believe, not war" and "laughter is a state of mind" say it all, and they're perfectly appropriate life-affirming notions. Ones that numerous Saturday morning cartoons had already drummed into our consciousness. Didn't Widget the World Watcher preach

the same message without claiming to be a deviously insightful black comedy?

Toys isn't a kid's movie at all, it simply leverages a juvenile, fantasy aesthetic (inspired by surrealist painter Rene Magritte) to pose a stark contrast between innocence, corruption and abuse of power. An intelligent, allegorical, cautionary tale diffused through the prism of surreal childish regalia. But for the token swearing, sexual innuendo, and shrouded sex scene, Toys could easily pass for a Universal rating owing to its tame sensibilities, simplistic dialogue and morality lessons. With so little to unravel, it feels more like Peppa Pig than Animal Farm.

